

# SHELF LOVE

ALEX NEWMAN

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Everybody told me this was such a great idea, moving out of my parents' house. That it would be good for me to expand my horizons. Get out and grow up.

Well, it's been about six months and here I am, sunk in the center of one of those big plushy wicker chairs that make you feel like the last apple in a basket. Meanwhile, the stacks of books just keep getting bigger.

I fish their delicious papered bodies from the discard pile in the library closet like a hungry wildcat in a stream of salmon. I dive into yard sale boxes and emerge with all the righteous triumph of a Red Cross nurse pulling a wounded soldier from the trenches. Late at night, I click and cruise the depths of online merchants in search of obscure titles recommended to me by well-meaning co-workers.

If I had neither money nor morals, I would assuredly be a book thief. And not the glamorous kind that wears Lycra catsuits and lifts priceless artifacts from beneath lasers. No, I'd be the kind that plucks pearly dust-jacketed hardbacks from the display case in some backlit retail outlet and shoves them beneath her blazer; tweaking with excitement like a crack addict at the weight pressed against my ribs. The kind that "rescues" a worn out double of a Robert Frost anthology from a public library because, hell, it's pretty and it hasn't been checked out in ages, and besides, they have two copies – then has a panic attack as she bolts through the metal detector to sweet daylight.

So yeah, about those horizons. If anything, my average number of dates has decreased since my relocation; sans the need to prove to my mom she indeed birthed a well-adjusted, college-educated, gainfully-employed, 24-year-old single-but-seeking woman.

I do joke about being the crazy book lady, just so people can think I'm ok with being alone and don't really take it so seriously. But who the hell am I kidding? What sorry fuck in their right mind wants to be alone with these dusty old things when they come home?

No, I didn't mean it. Really, Anne (Shirley), Tom (Sawyer), Harry (Potter)...I'm sorry. You know I love you.

So here I am, this perfectly decent, beautiful human being standing in front of me, sneaking glances at my spectacled face from the shadows of my irresistible horde of paper brats.

Ray Charles growls and moans on my record player downstairs. "I said Georgia...mhhh, Georgiaaa...the whole day through..." I had always wanted to dance to this song.

My guest's shoulders rise with particular Roman intensity, then sink heavily as he drops the atomic bomb.

"So you like books, huh?"

Like them? No, *like* is the understatement of the century, I almost snip. Did DaVinci "like" art? Did MJ "like" basketball? Wait, what are you doing? You can't say that. People don't say that. I like men too, I suddenly want to say. And I almost do. But the gods are kind and generous with their duct tape, so I just nod and squirm deeper into the apple basket.

"You read them all?"

My gut does a switchback under my belly skin and for a minute, I'm sure I've been infected by aliens. Or that I'm going to spew that perfectly decent French thing he paid for only a few hours ago. Or both. Talk about pushing a button. I want to lie and tell him I have, but I force myself to shake my head.

"Sooo..." the word hangs in the air, a needle pulling thread, "how many *have* you read?"

I swallow, but the drought in my mouth remains. You don't understand. They find me, I want to scream. I need them. They love me when no one does. After my hipster Valentine/bastard broke me in the spring, after the engaged one in college, after the reckless Aryan DJ in high school. Instead I mumble, "Maybe half."

"Huh." His second "huh" in the last 60 seconds. "Why don't you get an eReader or something?"

"Why don't cigar smokers use nicotine patches?" Oh, shit. That time I actually did speak. I hope it didn't sound as bitchy as it was in my head. Or that he now assumed I smoked cigars. After I'd taken such great pains to discard their half-burned lengths. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound crazy. I mean, it's true, but I'm not."

"Not what?" He runs the callused tip of his finger along the gold-filigreed spine of my Iliad Harvard Classic. A gesture that produced an electrical surge in my spine that pretty much shut down all feeling in my body from the waist up.

“Crazy.”

“You don’t have to say it, you know. Not to me,” he says. “Only crazy people have to say they’re not crazy.”

He slid my tattered paperback of *The Hobbit* from the shelf. “Can’t believe the man spent ten years on the same idea.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Have you even read Tolkien?” With all the miffed cheek as if I knew him personally.

He shrugs. “Of course. It was fine, I guess.” I practically have to smother myself to keep from an indignant outburst. Fine? He *guesses*?

“Does this bother you or something?” I ask, ruffling like a hen whose chick has just been labeled developmentally challenged. Even though I know, well hell, man, yes, it should. It should bother him. By society’s standards, he shouldn’t have to deal with this kind of revelation. Not on a first date anyway.

“Books? Bother me? Never.” He pauses. “What bothers me is how they bother you.”

Now it was my turn. “Huh?”

“You’re petrified of them. You don’t eat them, burn them, or steal them. You don’t let them fall into disrepair. You sort them and mean to read them, and sometimes do, but not always, because you do other things, too.” Like go to work, sleep, sometimes eat, sure. “And you keep acquiring them, even though you haven’t caught up to reading them all yet. But you’re also terrified of your love for them. Or I don’t know, maybe love in general.”

“What is your point?”

“You suffer under the delusion that I have one.” He flashed a smile. “Just observations up until now. I leave the conclusions to you. But if I ventured a guess? Stories are a welcome reprieve when one has found reality...fallen...short.”

I swallow, suddenly struck inside as though a cellist hooked a finger on my heartstring, pulled as far as it would go, then let it reverberate. The sick feeling returns. “You’re not real, are you?”

He laughs in his throat a bit. “Do you want me to be?”

“So far, yes. Yes, this doesn’t seem so bad.”

He twitches his head slightly to the right and squints the lower part of his eyes. “You see, the problem is, I’m with your friends here... I’m only as real as you let me be. People are that way, you know. You stop acknowledging them, stop seeing them, sometimes, they can just stop being.”

Bars of moonlight flicker on my paper-and-leather babies as I cross the room to the open window and the ice cold night. I squeeze my eyes shut. Is there any way to know? Is that what being crazy is? When you start to wonder exactly what it will take to prove to you this is real life?

“Georgia...ohhhhhh Georgiaaa...comes as sweet and clear as moonlight through the piiiiiiiiines...”

I feel his hand on my shoulder, turning me towards him.

“But *I* see you,” I say finally.

“Yet you won’t let me do the same,” he says. He smells like blended parchments and dust and dried up orchids.

So I let him kiss me.

We dance. Shuffle really. I watch the moonlight over his shoulder, then the shadows.

And I collapse—he can’t catch me, I practically fall through him—when I realize in horror that there is only one shadow.

I sob acid tears until my chest aches when I realize a second truth.

It isn’t mine.